

Chapter 6

Managing After a Disaster

A disaster such as an earthquake or hurricane creates unusual challenges for management. You and your staff may yourselves be suffering from its effects. Emotional stress, physical injury, bereavement, loss of property, and disruption of normal routines may limit the availability and energy of your work group. At the same time, the group may face new responsibilities - caring for its own members, and facilitating community recovery. Besides meeting customers' special needs for assistance following a disaster, agency personnel are often called on to support other Federal agencies in providing a wide range of community services.

Plan ahead. You and your work group should be familiar with any disaster plans that affect you, and should have your own plans, however informal, for how you might function in a disaster. Involving employees in planning helps give them a sense of empowerment, and can improve the quality of your plan by assuring that everyone's experience and skills are brought into play.

Despite the magnitude of the challenges, Federal Government agencies have a proud history of responding effectively to disasters. The following suggestions are general principles that can help you structure your disaster response (they are no substitute for a comprehensive disaster plan):

Take care of your own people first. You need to locate your staff and assure that they and their families have necessary medical care, housing, food, and other necessities before they can be effective in serving the public.

- Consider setting up a relief center. Particularly if traditional disaster relief agencies are slow to mobilize, you may need to set up a relief center for your own employees, and provide food and other essential items to those in need. If necessary, assign a group of employees, preferably volunteers, to internal disaster relief, and relieve them temporarily of other duties. Their tasks might include staffing the relief center, taking inventory of unmet needs of affected employees, and locating resources to fit the needs.
- Consider compiling resource information. Those most affected by the disaster are least likely to have functioning telephones, and may not be able to call around to

locate a new apartment, a child care provider, a rental truck, a place to board the dog, or any of the many goods and services they need to begin normalizing their lives. Compiling information in a booklet or card file can be very helpful, and can result in a document that is helpful to the public as well as employees.

Modify office rules and procedures that are counterproductive after a disaster.

Dress codes, rules about children in the office, and restrictions on using telephones for personal business, for example, may need to be temporarily adjusted in the post-disaster period. Agencies have the authority to grant administrative leave to employees who need time off to normalize their home and family situations.

Work cooperatively with employee unions. Disaster situations encourage labor-management cooperation, regardless of what the labor relations climate has been in the past. Labor and management share a deep concern for employees' well being and recovery; working together in an informal way can lead to more effective, flexible responses to employee needs.

Take steps to prevent accidents and illness. Much of the human suffering associated with a disaster happens after the event itself, and can be prevented through good management. It is particularly important to prevent the overwork and exhaustion that tend to occur as people throw themselves into disaster recovery operations. Post-disaster environments are often less safe and sanitary than normal ones, so that people living and working in them need to exercise special care. Exhaustion can lower resistance to disease, decrease alertness, impair judgment, and make people less careful about health precautions and more vulnerable to accidents. There are several strategies for assuring that people do not exhaust themselves:

- After an initial crisis period, during which overwork may be necessary, develop procedures to assure that employees do not work too many hours without rest.
- Be sure to provide adequate staffing for all new responsibilities created after the disaster, such as internal relief operations.
- Set limits on work hours, if necessary, and train managers to monitor their subordinates and check for signs of exhaustion.

- Since leaders are especially prone to overwork, monitor each other and set a positive example for subordinates.
- Take care to assure that no employee has an essential task that no one else knows how to do, or that person will surely be overworked.

Communicate clear priorities for work. Since some normal operations may be suspended and new ones undertaken, this must be done carefully and consistently.

Understanding priorities will not only help prevent overwork, but will also empower employees to make decisions about how to use their time most appropriately.

Provide opportunities for employees to talk about their stressful experiences. To recover from severe stress, people need to talk about what they have gone through, and to compare their reactions with those of others. Consider the following suggestions:

- Provide a group meeting organized by an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor or other mental health professional.
- Remind employees of procedures for scheduling individual EAP appointments, since some employees may need more personal assistance in resolving problems arising from the disaster.
- Offer opportunities for employees to share their experiences informally, for example, by providing a break area with coffee or other refreshments.

Special considerations when employees are detailed out to other agencies

- It is important that detailed employees remain in contact with their own organization.
- They should, whenever possible, be deployed in small groups, so each employee will have a few familiar people to turn to for support.
- Visits by agency managers can be very helpful in conveying information and boosting morale.

- Informal newsletters can be a valuable source of information.
- Information can reduce the detailed employees' stress from worrying about co-workers, while reassuring them that they are still a valued part of their own organization.